

Survey Design for Program Evaluation

Gifted program **evaluation** and **accountability** are provisions of the Exceptional Children’s Educational Act (ECEA). Soliciting input from stakeholders is part of a continuous program evaluation process. Collecting “periodic feedback” from stakeholders is one of the defined methods in regulations for self-evaluation and review of the gifted program plan. Stakeholders can include: parents, families, teachers, administrators, and students of an administrative unit (AU). AU means a school district, a board of cooperative services (BOCES), or the state Charter School Institute.

The AU determines the schedule and methods for collecting program information and communicates that information with stakeholders. ECEA rules state an AU shall inform parents, educators, and other required persons about their method(s) for periodic feedback. [12.02(2)(i)(iv-v)]

How and when administrative units collect feedback may vary. Gathering and providing results of stakeholder feedback is a required component of the **Colorado Gifted Education Monitoring (GEM)** process. AUs determine a method for collecting periodic feedback and how data are summarized and reported. Analysis of stakeholder data aids the AU in identifying program strengths and areas for improvement.

Surveys and focus groups are two methods frequently used by AUs to solicit stakeholder feedback. A **survey** may be disseminated to collect feedback, and/or **focus groups** may be held to collect valuable information about the gifted program plan. This guidance document addresses surveys; more information about conducting gifted program focus groups can be found on the [Evaluation and Accountability webpage](http://www.cde.state.co.us/gt/evaluation). (http://www.cde.state.co.us/gt/evaluation)

The AU should always obtain the superintendent or executive director’s permission prior to initiating any type of survey. It is critical to follow the AU/district’s protocol and procedures for collecting student input. There are specific state and federal laws pertaining to what type of student information can be collected and reported.

strengths, interests, and needs; and monitoring the child’s academic achievement and growth and affective goals [12.01(5)].

Surveys are a classic method for data collection. They are flexible, easy to implement, and offer a nearly limitless range of data with reliable results. The data gathered during an effective survey provides a unique opportunity to obtain detailed insight into a program. Because you can gather large amounts of feedback directly from individuals who are affected by the program, surveys act as the finger on the pulse of your project and can measure its strength.

Institute for Dynamic Educational Advancement (IDEA 2015)

Periodic feedback, unlike student progress monitoring, is in regard to program evaluation of the ECEA program elements. Evaluation means seeking input from administrators, teachers, parents and students on procedures, methods, and/or tools used to implement program elements.

Evaluation includes: *Identifying the priorities and concerns of the child’s family and resources to which the family and the child’s school have access; determining program strengths and areas for program improvement; identifying*

DETERMINING THE SURVEY PLATFORM

There are many options an AU may consider for survey distribution. A **paper-pencil** survey can easily be developed and distributed to stakeholder groups. If you want to collect feedback at an event such as a parent night, a teacher or administrator meeting, or a gifted class, a paper-pencil survey may be disseminated. This format does not require participants to have access to a technology device and it ensures a high response rate. Collecting, tabulating, and reporting data from paper and pencil surveys may be time consuming.

Another option is to conduct a survey using an **online** platform. There are online survey tools that are free, such as Google Forms. Other companies provide added capabilities for a minimal charge, such as *SurveyMonkey* and *SurveyGizmo*. The advantages of disseminating a survey using an online platform include:

- Real-time analysis of accurate data;
- Ease of use; and
- Automatic generation of reports.

In order to collect a representative sample of student responses, it is recommended to have students complete the survey at school. Students could be invited to the computer lab at a specific time, or mobile computer carts can be made available during gifted classes, events or activities.

If an online survey will be used, it is important to consider whether all families have access to email and the internet.

If it is determined that families may not have access to technology within the home, the AU may wish to consider the following options:

- Have a paper-pencil survey available for completion; and/or
- Provide computers at the school where parents can complete a survey while visiting the school at an open house or student conference.

SURVEY COMPLETION

To maximize response rate and collect valid and reliable data, consider these best-practices.

- **Choose the right time of year.** What is the best time to survey stakeholders? Early in the school year, new personnel may still be familiarizing themselves with the gifted program and getting to know their students. Students are settling into new course work and parents may not have attended an open house and/or Advanced Learning Plan (ALP) conference. The end of the school year also presents timing issues with state assessments, breaks, and end-of-year fatigue. Therefore, consider the first of November, mid-January or February for best results.
- **Set a specific due date.** Surveys that are open for extended periods of time lead to skewed results. Set and communicate a clear due date with stakeholders. Research shows that eighty percent of responses are collected in the first week after a survey is disseminated, and multiple reminders may be needed to ensure completion.
- **Communicate using multiple platforms.** If using an online survey, an email is typically sent out including a link to the survey. In addition to an email, consider placing the link on your district website, mailing a flyer through the postal service, and/or adding the information in your school/district newsletter. This correspondence may note that a paper-pencil survey is available if needed.
- **Include an introduction of purpose.** At the beginning of the survey, a short paragraph should explain the purpose of the survey and how data will be analyzed and reported.
- **Tell respondents the survey is anonymous.** It is important to tell respondents the survey is anonymous and feedback is valued and used for continuous improvement. Anonymous surveys allow participants to be open and honest.
- **Keep it short and simple.** In the introduction, clearly indicate how long it will take to complete the survey. Most surveys should take about five minutes to complete, with ten minutes being the maximum. If a respondent



wants to take longer adding narrative comments, this is his/her choice. Adding a progress bar at the bottom of the survey may help motivate respondents to complete the survey.

- **Use appropriate language.** Survey questions for parents and students should be free of educational jargon and acronyms. Make questions simple and easy to understand.
- **Field test the survey.** It is best to field test the survey with 5-10 members of each stakeholder group prior to mass dissemination. This helps to ensure questions are clear and that important topics or areas have been addressed within the survey.
- **Make sure the survey works on multiple devices.** Ensure your survey works on a computer or mobile devices, as people may use both tools.
- **Use skip logic.** Online survey software often provides the ability to design a survey with “skip logic.” This means that a respondent is asked a specific question and based on the response, additional survey questions then become available. This is more efficient than listing many questions on a survey that are not applicable to all respondents.
Example: “I am in the following grade.” After the student selects the grade level, questions pertaining to that level of school become available for him/her to answer.
- **Provide the survey in the primary languages of the AU.** To ensure equal and equitable access, the AU should determine if a survey needs to be developed in other primary languages.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

When developing the survey format, provide both **quantitative** and **qualitative** forms of questions. Determining questions is one of the biggest challenges in survey development. Drs. Neumeister and Burney have developed research-based questions for gifted program evaluation. Suggested questions can be found in their book, *Gifted Program Evaluation: A Handbook for Administrators and Coordinators*. The Gifted Education Regional Consultant (GERC) can also provide AUs technical assistance for survey development.

Qualitative survey questions provide participants an opportunity to write comments about a specific idea or topic. For example, “What are the strengths of your child’s gifted programming?” Typically, qualitative comments come at the end of survey sections. Responding to comment sections in a survey should be voluntary, although some online survey programs include a function that requires a response before moving to the next question. Open-ended comment boxes should provide ample room to allow respondents to describe their thoughts without being overwhelming. Boxes that are too small may lead to omission of important details. Field testing the survey will help in determining the appropriate size of comment boxes.

Quantitative survey questions may allow respondents to respond on a Likert scale, rank items in order, or select applicable options from a list. When reporting survey responses, these questions can be quantified and displayed in graphs and charts. When using a Likert scale, best practice suggests offering an odd number of descriptive ratings to choose from, ideally between five and seven; too many will lead to confusion and ambiguity. Limit the amount of questions that require a simple “Yes” or “No” or “Agree” or “Disagree.” It is important that rating scales also include a “Do not know” or “Not applicable” choice.

Example: Strongly Agree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree, Not Applicable

Important considerations for question design:

- **Avoid bias.** Ensure your response rate represents your district demographics and data represents all subgroups. Questions should be written in a way that promotes truthful answers and will not lead a respondent to answer in a specific way.
- **One topic.** Ensure that questions ask respondents to consider only one element or aspect at a time.



- **Avoid leading questions.** Stay away from emotionally charged words or the use of adjectives and adverbs.
- **Use a balanced scale of responses.** If there will be five choices on a scale, make sure two represent the highest points, one is neutral, and two represent the lowest points. Having four ratings on the highest end and only one of the lowest end would skew results.
- **Use similar format and scale for all questions.** Use the same Likert scale and format for every question to prevent survey fatigue. Keep the highest points or positive ratings always listed in the same order so that respondents do not inadvertently select the wrong response. This is not a reading comprehension test!
- **Order of questions is important.** Asking simpler questions first leads to respondents being more willing to complete a survey. Asking for comments at the end will also assist with the time required to complete the survey.

DATA ANALYSIS

An AU may conduct a survey for a variety of purposes including progress monitoring of the Comprehensive Program Plan (CPP), informing programming decisions, or preparing for the monitoring process. Identifying the purpose of the survey will determine how the AU chooses to communicate the findings. Communication may include reports and/or oral presentations of the data findings. If providing a survey summary report in a **public forum**, such as a school board meeting or gifted advocacy group, it is important to not share **personal identifiable information (PII)**.

Data collected through surveys represents a stakeholder's perception. Understanding these perceptions will assist the AU in determining next steps to better clarify understanding about a program element. When analyzing survey data, it is important to break down the results by different groups (e.g., by building level or stakeholder group) to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of program elements at each level. Knowing the response rate is also critical to evaluate the validity of the data. It is important that data represent the AU's demographics and that the response rate for each stakeholder group is proportional.

Instead of reporting raw data only, the use of charts, tables and other graphics will help paint a better visual picture. Break narrative into major categories or "big ideas." Manipulating the data by increasing or decreasing the "x" and "y" axis of a graph is not ethically advised. Intentionally skewing results will devalue the overall process of a program evaluation.

USING RESULTS TO DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

The foundational purpose of conducting a survey is to identify programming strengths and areas for future improvement. Developing an action plan to specifically address targeted areas of improvement ensure the results of the survey were meaningful and time well spent for the AU and respondents. An action plan may include:

- Target for improvement;
- Specific steps to address the target;
- Timeline;
- Personnel responsible;
- Ways to monitor progress; and
- How success will be measured and reported.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Neumeister, Kristie Spiers & Burney, Virginia H., *Gifted Program Evaluation: A Handbook for Administrators and Coordinators*, Prufrock Press, Waco, TX, 2012.

SurveyMonkey, *Surveys 101*, 2017.